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SUBJECT: PART I: CONSTRAINTS ON NORWAY'S MIDDLE EAST ROLE?

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[1](#)B. 06 OSLO 1047

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Kevin M. Johnson
for reasons 1.4 b and d

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Norway aspires to be a leader in Middle East peace negotiations and could be a genuine asset in bringing peace to the region. Norway's diplomatic principles, focus on dialogue, and mediation history have helped raise Norway's profile as a peacemaker. Its tense relationship with Israel and anti-Semitism in Norway, as well as its approach to Hamas and Hamas positions, could constrain the effectiveness of Norway's desired high-profile mediator role. Part II of this cable series explores the growth of anti-Semitism in Norway and Part III analyses Norway's Foreign Minister's critical role in elevating Norway on the world stage. End Summary.

Norwegian Diplomacy: Strengths and Desire for a Big Role

[1](#)2. (C) Shaped by FM Stoere, Norwegian foreign policy prioritizes peace promotion. Stoere is a skilled foreign minister, drawing on national traditions of international engagement, and adding his own focus on humanitarian aid and peace promotion to create an appealing portrayal of Norway as a world leader in peacemaking. Stoere dearly desires a central role in shaping Middle East peace and believes he has the ability to deliver. Norway brings clear strengths to the table. Stoere has been careful to maintain constant ties with Hamas (although no longer on the political level), steady and significant support for the Palestinian Authority and continued regular ties to Israel. Norway has a global reputation for expertise in peace negotiations in Guatemala, Tibet, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka among others, although their efforts have floundered lately. Norway also willing to spend substantial money in the promotion of peace. Norway's non-EU membership can also at times be helpful. (Practically, Norway follows the vast majority of EU positions but has diverged, most notably in holding talks with the Tamil Tigers and Hamas, EU designated terrorist groups.)

Mediation Expertise

[1](#)3. (C) Norwegian society values dialogue above all. Talk, even without any expectation of results, is seen as valuable. Anyone who draws a line and refuses to talk to an opposing party is seen as a radical unilateralist. Conversely,

Norwegians are extremely opposed to the use of military force to achieve goals, no matter how laudable.

¶4. (C) Compounding this aversion to force, Norwegians do not generally see any threats. For example, they do not see a danger from terrorism. (This attitude prevails in the MFA and other elites, despite FM Stoere's hotel being attacked by suicide bombers in Kabul.) This societal attitude was demonstrated by Norway's first terrorist case. Despite shooting at Oslo's synagogue, planning to behead the Israeli ambassador and to attack the Israeli and U.S. embassies, the accused was convicted only of grave vandalism (although his strict sentence showed some understanding of the severity of the charges).

¶5. (C) Finally, Norway has substantial funds to back any mediating role it chooses to play. Rich with energy funds, it has for years been a leading donor to the Palestinian authority, most recently chairing the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee. Historically, it has been willing to commit to the long-term, funding projects to promote peace in Sri Lanka for example for over 27 years.

¶6. (C) Norway's desire to make a difference combined with the willingness to expend time and money has made it a mediator in conflicts as far a field as Sri Lanka, Colombia, Haiti, and Sudan. It has elevated peace and reconciliation studies in its universities and reorganized its Foreign Ministry to showcase its expertise in this area. It revels in its self-described role as the "moral superpower" and points to the Oslo Peace Accords as a defining national moment. Norway's History with its Jewish Community and Israel

¶7. (C) In the Middle East, however, its history may constrain the role it can play. Norway's Jewish community has always been very small and based in the country's biggest cities, Oslo and Trondheim. Challenges confronted the community early on. The birth of modern Norway was its 1814 constitution, which included a clause excluding Jews (later removed in 1851). In German-occupied Norway, Norwegian police cooperated with the Germans, rounding up almost all of the Norwegian Jewish population, most of which were sent to concentration camps.

¶8. (C) Post-war Norway cultivated close ties with Israel and much political support existed for Israel. The Norwegian Labor Party (long the dominant party in Norway) has historically had close ties to Israel's labor party and Golda Meir visited Oslo and reportedly had a friendly personal relationship with Norwegian PM Gerhardsen. This resulted in Norway secretly providing heavy water to the fledgling Israeli nuclear program.

¶9. (C) The 1990s Oslo Process thrust Norway into Middle East politics for the first time and seemed to herald peace in the Middle East as well as a new peacemaker role for Norway. As the Oslo Accords crumbled, ties between Norway and Israel weakened. The Lebanon wars had a major impact, with approximately 20,000 Norwegians serving in UN peacekeeping forces in Lebanon from 1978 to 1998. These soldiers came home with sympathetic reports about Palestinian refugees and negative impressions of Israelis. Israeli settlements and walls in the West Bank, and invasions of Lebanon and Gaza contributed to Norwegians' increasingly negative view of Israel.

¶10. (C) This shift was so dramatic that a 2006 cartoon in a major newspaper depicted the PM of Israel as a concentration camp guard. During the 2006 war in Lebanon prominent author Jostein Gaarder made a statement saying "I refuse to recognize the state of Israel" and characterized Judaism as "an archaic national and warlike religion." (See septel and ref B for a detailed discussion of anti-Semitism in Norway.) By 2007, FM Stoere decided to recognize the Palestinian Unity Government, which included Hamas Ministers. Hamas' vow to destroy Israel was ignored or characterized as only rhetoric by the Norwegians. Norway became the leading dissenter to international norms (only joined by

Switzerland), willing to overlook Hamas' stated aims in pursuit of dialogue at all costs. At this point, some Israeli officials began to characterize Norway as the most anti-Israel state in Europe. (Note: Although the GON would deny it, there are clear signs that contacts with Hamas go beyond a tactical desire for dialogue to a level of sympathy for Hamas positions. The FM once told DCM for example that one could not expect Hamas to recognize Israel without knowing which borders Israel will have. While the FM expresses some sympathy for Hamas' positions only in unguarded moments, other prominent Norwegians go further. End Note.)

¶11. (C) Norway's growing minority population also plays a role in hardening public attitude toward Israel. The primary minority groups in Norway (25% of Oslo's population) are Muslim and stem from Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Afghanistan. They are interested in Middle East politics and not surprisingly very critical of Israel. (See reftel A.) "Traditional" Norwegians are independently quite critical of Israel as discussed above, but it is likely that this viewpoint will be re-enforced by the growing minority groups in Norway.

Gaza's Impact

¶12. (C) The recent Gaza war further hardened anti-Israel attitudes in Norway's public and elite opinion, with the notable exceptions of the Progress Party (about 25% of the vote) and the small Christian Democratic Party. However the size of recent pro-Israel (500) and anti-Israel demonstrations (over 10,000) illustrate the prevailing sentiments. (See reftel A.)

¶13. (C) Since the Gaza war, the question of whether anti-Semitism is on the increase became the subject of an intense public debate. Much of the debate centers on defining when comments by public figures are or are not anti-Semitic. Press coverage and public opinion of the Gaza war was overwhelmingly, and at times vehemently, anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian (viewing Israeli tactics as brutal and Palestinians as innocent victims). Therefore the question of anti-Semitism has often been phrased in terms of when criticism of Israel crosses the line into anti-Semitism. (See septel for a detailed discussion of the strong comments that have been made by leading Norwegian politicians questioning the ability of Jewish members of the Obama government to give unbiased advice and outlining the sense of threat felt by the Norwegian Jewish community.)

¶14. (C) On the official level, Hamas' rocket attacks against Israel received criticisms, but the clear focus of Norwegian diplomacy encouraged Israel to be restrained and to maintain dialogue. While FM Stoere has been careful to criticize both parties, Norway clearly places most of the blame for the conflict on Israel's policies.

Israel's Reaction

¶15. (C) The Israel Government has chosen, according to an Embassy official, to take a very low key approach to Norway's negative views towards Israel. They see no point in openly pressing the government. With GON Ministers and Vice Ministers having a track record of meeting with Hamas, calling for boycotts of Israel, and showing up at violent anti-Israeli riots, the Israel Embassy holds out very little hope that the current GON can ever act moderately towards Israel. That said, they appreciate that the GON MFA is disciplining one of its own for anti-Semitic emails and that an initial meeting between FM Stoere and the Israeli Ambassador was very positive. They hope that small steps such as an R&D agreement may bring some slight warming of relations.

¶16. (C) However, the Israeli Embassy official noted that while his view of the GON may be negative, the view of Norway in the GOI is even less positive, and the view of the Israeli public which sees only negative items about Norway in the

media is even less. Therefore, while Israel can tolerate Norway being the Chair of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee for Palestine (ADHL), the idea of any greater role for Norway in Middle East talks is unpalatable.

Comment

¶17. (C) Norway, and particularly their charismatic Foreign Minister, has a strong interest in playing a peacemaker role.

With money to spend and open channels to all parties in the conflict, they bring important assets to this role. However, Norway's attitudes towards Israel and Hamas also constrain Norwegian diplomatic efforts in the Middle East. Norwegian public and elite opposition to most of Israel's actions and their view that Israel does not value dialogue is widely reported. A level of Norwegian sympathy for some Hamas' positions, hidden behind its broad policy of dialogue with all, should be kept in mind as we engage with Norway on U.S. Middle East priorities. End comment.

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